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ABSTRACT

The works of over 75 communication scholars have consistently traced the markers of communication in African American life. There exists a complex and varied corpus that is necessarily interdisciplinary and multifarious in perspectives and context. The space(s) is theirs to define and, perhaps, to claim. Such studies may reward scholars most when they are nuanced with the kind of historical consciousness that gives way to analytical narratives and allows reflection on the moral accountabilities which telling such stories often produces. A nuanced historical narrative constructs African American life while remembering that both the past and the present are composites of equivocality, dubiety, ambiguity. The principal issue regarding Afrocentricity in African American communication studies is the degree to which Afrocentric perspectives advance the collection of stories and analyses that will allow scholars to understand how they signify meaning and create understanding within the contexts of macrostructural dehumanization. Popular African American culture is fertile with the markers of the "dynamics of being" of African descent in the United States. The production and consumption of African American popular culture in the context of all American cultural productivity alongside the influences of market-driven values are within the purview of African American communication studies. (RS)

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FOREVER CLAIMING OUR SPACE(S): AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND THE REPERTOIRES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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FOREVER CLAIMING OUR SPACE(S): AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND THE REPERTOIRES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

"My master was Com. Bowen. He was more father than master. He always said he should set me free before he died. But he died soon, and I was left by will to his nephew, Judge Bowen, from Providence, with instructions that I should be free as soon as I could take care of myself. But not to dwell, I WAS IN SLAVERY."

Mr. Johnson

Liberator, February 4, 1857

[In this essay I claim the space and take the risks associated with reflecting in front of colleagues about this year's theme: Communication, Consciousness and Culture.]

Mr. Johnson, stood giving this testimony as a formerly enslaved African at the fifth annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Boston on January 26, 1837 (Blassingame, 1977, pp. 124-128). That was 120 years, to the day, before I was born. We share this date: January 26. For Mr. Johnson, it was a day to tell his story. For me, it is a day to have my story told. From the day I read Mr. Johnson's narrative--how he *remembers* that he was born in Africa, taken away from home, brought here, and so fourth--I have been as impressed with the date of his speech as I have with the vivid way he constructs the enslaved part of his life. I frequently situate my life with reference to his.

Identity is a tricky thing. I can no longer imagine constructing an idea of "Jeffrey Lynn Woodyard" without respecting "Mr. Johnson." Understanding myself in relation to Mr. Johnson brings me to frequent analytical moments. They are spaces for reflection when I have to search out the underlying social realities of my life--a life I have come to call (among several options) an African American life.

Instantaneously the moments intensify for I am no longer searching out my life--alone. I become this African American among all these African Americans whose communication I study--*as if I really could study all these African Americans and their communication(s)*. Wow, what a moment! Situated in African American Communication Studies as an African American whose life itself is situated alongside Mr. Johnson, whose life, we must agree, is situated in the life of a woman who mothered him... and on, and on. I am writing these ideas in one of those intense moments: a space that insists I search out the meaning, not only of Mr. Johnson's impact on my identity, but of this enterprise that we can construct as African American Communication Studies.

African American Communication Studies

Defining a field, pointing to its principal issues, arguing its particular urgencies, locating it within the postmodern is about defining the space(s) in which we live as scholars. Identity is a tricky thing! The works of over 75 communication scholars, some in attendance at this annual meeting, have consistently traced the markers of communication in African American life. There exists a complex and varied corpus that is necessarily interdisciplinary

and multifarious in perspectives and contexts. The space(s) is ours to define. Perhaps, it is ours to claim.

How shall we situate African American Communication Studies as a constituent of the human sciences? What might be some of its fundamental urgencies and priorities? By what forces--social, spiritual, or otherwise--is it driven? How might we delimit its paradigmatic assumptions? Perhaps most importantly: should we endeavor, in our study, to reflect the same values of human equality that provide the genius of our historic struggle for liberation? Situating African American Communication Studies is much like situating a human life.

Situating a human life is one way of organizing and attributing meaning to that life. Increasingly, I am seduced by the notion that our studies reward us most when they are nuanced with the kind of historical consciousness that gives way to analytical narratives and allows reflection on the moral accountabilities which telling our stories so often produces. By moral accountabilities, I am suggesting the sense of obligation that might arise from insightful, perhaps passionate, re-presentations of African American life, *locally*. This obligatory impulse is not the kind associated with enabling people to believe that their sense of localized power is so regulatory as to have real (not imagined) impact on personal narratives. To obligate in that way would produce that false sense of blame and guilt that, in turn, can only result in a reinforcement of that initial false sense of personal power. That is, no one ever has or will have the kind of power to render her (or better, him)

personally "responsible" for the residual effects of what amounts to be systemic social patterns and practices that prohibit human equality.

Rather, I am being persuaded that moral accountabilities stemming from nuanced historical narratives promote an irresistible tendency towards human understanding and critical analysis of the overreaching structural power relations in which an African American (or any person) would find herself/himself. Because one has the opportunity to "hear" the life(s) of another, s/he may, for the first time, be placed within an analytical moment pregnant with instances of identification and association. One of the prevailing assumptions about the efficacy of these moral accountabilities is that the human experience is complex with commonalities and shared life-moments. *So mutual are our African American lives, yet so camouflaged is that sharing that perhaps only by way of localized narratives do we arrive at the moments where we understand that the material and cultural conditions that so easily function to make us unique and distinct are never powerful enough to really make us different.*

If a human life, as text, can be read for its positive and negative references to other texts--the attribution of its meaning deferred, maybe forever (Derrida, 1981, p. 39-40), it can also be read as a copy of a copy whose original evades our grasp. As such the highest value of situating a human life in nuanced historical narrative might be most appropriately placed in the celebration of discovering those conditions which simultaneously and brutally overdetermine our African American life/lives.

Taking our lead from Cornel West's search for a theoretical pragmatic responding to the absurdity of African descent in the United States, nuanced historical narratives help to situate African American life and communication by attending to what he has called the "macrostructural" modes that serve as overdetermining variables. His reference includes resistance to those modes (West, 1985). That is, *coming to an understanding of African American life(s) privileges localizing our analyses of that/those life(s)--and the communication which serves as its/their primary markers --until we have teased out the manifestations of and our resistance(s) to those macrostructural modes, which are (1) the subordination of human beings by crafting a concept of race, (2) class exploitation, (3) patriarchal domination, (4) homophobic marginalization and (5) ecological abuse* (West, 1993, p. 243).

A nuanced historical narrative constructs African American life(s) while remembering that both the past and the present are composites of equivocality, dubiety, ambiguity. Such a text would situate African American life in the hybrid of macrostructural and cultural uncertainties from which they emerge. African American life and communication might be recognized as a grand mulatto (hardly tragic, rather triumphant).

We could learn a lot from Gonzalez, Houston and Chen (1994), who recently remind us to "invite *experience* into our understanding and studying of cultural communication" (*xiv*). They and their essayists "demonstrate the vast cultural diversity within any given racial, ethnic, and national category." [But they neither interrogate the efficacy of such categorizations nor their

overdetermining effects.] Together, they create a "landmark" for the study of intercultural communication by following Nietzschean ideas about genealogy as historical methodology and by privileging local narratives as a way of getting at underlying social patterns and practices.

Human Equality in African American Communication Studies

If it is conceivable that I might construct historically conscious narratives about me, then, being only 120 years free from Mr. Johnson's recollection about being in slavery tells me quite a bit about who I am. Actually, it raises questions about me. I search for the impact of Mr. Johnson on my life. I want to be able to tell my story in light of his narrative.

It follows that situating our study involves us being able to attend to the localized narratives of African American life, culture and communication. These variant stories provide information about the *dynamics of being* of African descent in America. They point us toward an appreciation for the historical consciousness we know is so essential to our seeing ourselves as we really are. The narratives themselves form a hearty dialogue among the often conflated or disjointed or obfuscated voices that speak the ambiguous nature of this space in which we live.

Our nuanced historical consciousness allows us to understand those macrostructural modes that have created power relations of domination and subordination. In this way, as African American Communication scholars we are free to examine the rhetorics of structural social practices and patterns, teasing out the overdetermining influences of those discursive and

extradiscursive conditions that promote exploitation, domination and repression of all African American life (West, 1985).

I marvel, for example, at the prospect, in this field of study, of embracing the narratives of African American women with a keen sense of the historical and material conditions which affect their lives to arrive at a fuller understanding of (1) how *we* signify meaning and create understanding, (2) who *we* are, and (3) who *I* am. Our scholarships suffers from not enough local narratives of women from distinct geographic communities, class communities, professional communities, women who have reared children with men and women who have done so as single parents, women who have found success in the "white" academy and women who have not, women from our various religious and spiritual communities and sexual and affectational communities, from creators to consumers of popular culture, from the cultural and intellectual elite to the homeless.

The hypothesis that only African American women need address Western gender domination is errant because any personal narrative of African American life reveals the effects of sexism. Because our field is dominated by the presuppositions and perspectives of men and Eurocentric prerogatives, we might be all the more urgent about constructing a view of ourselves and our field that adequately replaces any human domination with the proclivities of human equality. *Any central claim of authority over other ideas, perspectives, life-experiences alongside any essential-izing tendencies are problematic.*

Local narratives allow us to understand how the discourse(s) of domination affect our varied African American lives. Hearing, for example, African American lesbians, gays and bisexuals articulate from where they live helps us to understand that homophobic discourse is a constitutive element of the rhetoric of Western domination into which all African Americans are born. Homophobic domination is a form of macrostructural repression that visits all of us because it is pervasive and overreaching. The hypothesis that only African American lesbians and gays need address this domination is errant because any personal narrative of African American life reveals the effects of homophobia.

Clearly, we have no vested interest in the homophobic enterprise. For we have no claim on the structural space is occupies. That is, playing the role of sycophants regarding the structural rhetoric of homophobia, as we have done so well in our homes, our communities, our popular culture and in our scholarship, has gained us no increase of access to structures of power relations and social practices. What I mean to say is: "Hating faggots and dykes has not gotten us our freedom." Our study, gaining insight from the voices of **all** our sisters and brothers meets the challenges of its moral obligation only when it *resists* the rhetoric of homophobic domination, for example.

Still More Afrocentric Ideas

Our study benefits from the narratives of *de-essentialized* Afrocentric perspectives. Some have confused the assumption of an African subject position with the "notion of a black essence" (Julien, 1992, p. 263). They are

not the same. We must be clear that placing African values and ideals in the subject position leaves room for this type of nuanced historical appreciation. Again, a careful construction of African identity embraces the historical/cultural ambiguity and hybridity that is Africa. That is, to the degree that we can demonstrate *an* African point of view from any historic moment in the African continental cultural continuum, it is appropriate to place that view at the center of analysis. No single construction of African consciousness can afford to claim sole or primary authority.

Part of the present controversy about Afrocentricity results from what some have called nationalist urgencies to define the Black Authentic (Collins, 1993). It is easy to understand that "blackness" is a construction that is open to wide interpretation and always suggests a binary opposition to "whiteness." Our study rejects this preoccupation. Perhaps we should focus, instead, on narratives and analyses that reveal the *dynamics of being* of African descent in the West. The principal issue regarding Afrocentricity in African American Communication Studies is the **degree to which Afrocentric perspectives advance the collection of our stories and analyses that will allow us to understand how we signify meaning and create understanding within the contexts of macrostructural dehumanization**.

The collection of our stories and studies tells us who we are. It provides a corpus whose primary urgency is human equality and liberation from the macrostructural practices that promote our dehumanization. Afrocentric, feminist, anti-homophobic research is perhaps the most viable

way of producing these narratives so long as we understand these terms to be as inclusive as our daily and collective lived-experiences.

The Repertoires of African American Popular Culture

Popular African American culture is fertile with the markers of the *dynamics of being* of African descent in the United States. The production and consumption of African American popular culture in the context of all American cultural productivity alongside the influences of market-driven values are within the purview of African American Communication Studies. Through the commodities of film, music videos, hip-hop culture, jazz and fusion, situation comedy, televangelism, print media and the photographic we are buying and selling our identities, or at least some construction of who we and others think we are.

What market influences do we, as scholars, have on popular culture and this portraiture? What influences does popular cultural productivity have on our continual identity formation and signification? To what degree can we any longer speak of African American cultural and communication traditions and practices given the export and import of cultural phenomena among co-cultural communities and constituencies? These, alongside traditional African American rhetorical and signifying practices, are some of the issues surrounding popular culture that our studies might address through rigorous attendance to localized narratives and the analysis they bring to bear.

Our narratives tend to reveal how we have claimed our space(s) when none had been made for us. We are forever claiming our space(s), it seems.

Really, the study of our communication produces signs about signs

about signs signifying who we are as devalued humans. How can it be said that the repertoires of African American popular culture and our study of them advance the claiming of space(s) so germane to life for us? Mr. Johnson was claiming space for himself when he declared, "I WAS IN SLAVERY." On that January 26, his testimony was that he wasn't a commodity any more. But his story recounts that his owner was more like a father than master to him. So fatherly was he that he promised Mr. Johnson freedom before he died. Of course, freedom is never free and Mr. Johnson was left to prove to another generation that he was capable of taking care of himself before eventually saying, "I WAS IN SLAVERY." [I'm not a commodity any more.]

Again, how can it be said that the repertoires of African American popular culture advance the claim on our space(s)? By repertoires of popular culture, I mean that stock of ritual signs and tropes, characters and plots, scripts and properties, caricatures and stereoforms, leaps, dips and sways, the improvised swoons, the beats, melodies and dirges, our lyrical lives and our bodies; *all that we have*--our repertoire. We have brought our repertoire to the marketplace and offered it--a commodity--on the high-stakes auction block for the world--even ourselves--to grope and jab, measure and price and buy and sell. I cannot help wondering what Mr. Johnson would say of me as I see willfully consume (at no small cost) our images and signs.

I come finally to that moment I'd wanted to avoid in this essay. Identity is a tricky thing. I have held that a nuanced historical appreciation helps me to situate my life and my intellectual life in such a way that I discover, if for the first time, that what we (I) do in African American

Communication Studies is to collect and analyze local narratives. We signify based on the self-signification of folk whose stories, once voiced, prove, simultaneously, our human equality and the subjectification and domination of our lives. Our study uniquely advances human understanding because we are able to deconstruct the rhetorics of domination in African American life. Because of our work, we can no longer pretend that some of us are more human than others of us.

Our study, then, casts a critical gaze upon the repertoires of popular cultural production and consumption and asks, referencing Mr. Johnson, what the hell am I doing to myself? Here I am with the tools to fetter-out and disrupt the rhetorics of domination and dehumanization. Here I am studying African American communication: busy knowing what I know, seeing what I see, and hearing what I hear from my sisters, my brothers, my fathers and mothers and from Mr. Johnson. And here I am facing the prostitution of my life and culture, in a reflective moment about claiming space(s) of human equality.

Yet, I am afraid, like Mr. Johnson, I might have to wait and prove to another that I can take care of myself, before I can be free...

But not to dwell, Mr. Johnson, identity is a tricky thing!

Oh yes, Molefi Kete Asante had an interesting thing to say about slavery:

> "A slave is one who has been reduced to an artifact of an oppressor's creation and changed into something defined, fabricated, and marked by the will of another as being useful

for the oppressor's purposes, thereby losing one's own material and creative terms" (1990, p. 192).

Identity is a tricky thing!

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